



Review: [Untitled]

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If... by Lindsay Anderson
Albert Johnson

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Isadora and her Grecian ideals of simplicity, beauty, feeling have given way to the gyrations of an indistinguishable mass of jerky, peppy jazz babies—vapid, bob-haired, bow-tied automatons, whose dance is passionless frenzy. Her death—the sudden strangulation—stuns us with its abruptness and ugliness: we see the head flung back, the eyes frozen in a ghastly stare, the body imprisoned by her scarf, the symbol of her freedom. This brutal moment shocks us out of any sentimentality we cultivate about the artist's life. It is the final comment on Isadora's vulnerability; the harsh rebuttal to her creativity, her dedication to life; a mocking of her attempt to clarify reality through art; it is death, the ultimate absurdity art cannot answer. The camera moves from the body to the young dancers by the sea, blithely ignorant of tragedy, and finally to the sea, where even their buoyant strains become an eerie, ghost-like echo. Death comes suddenly to each generation. And "Bye, Bye, Blackbird" is an appropriate epitaph both for them and for Isadora. The song has the deceptive sense of life in its rhythmic vitality, but its melancholy words suggest finality.

—ESTELLE CHANGAS

IF . . .

Direction: Lindsay Anderson. Screenplay: David Sherwin. Music: Marc Wilkinson. Photography: Miroslav Ondricek. Editor: David Gladwell. Paramount.

If there had ever been any doubt that Lindsay Anderson's second feature would surpass any of the recent films made in Great Britain, or that after all these years, the imagination and compassion for humanity exhibited in *This Sporting Life* (1963) would finally find a cinematic outlet again, then the time has come for suspension of doubt and acknowledgment of his genius. His new film, *If . . .*, is one of the most extraordinary studies of adolescence and education in the history of motion pictures: we may talk about it together with such masterworks as *Zéro de Conduite* and *Maedchen in Uniform*. This film is both a commentary upon and in-

direct indictment of the traditions of private education in England. The elements of satire and anarchy, of poetic fantasy and melodrama, are allegorically mingled into something rare and timeless. Each of the film's eight episodes is a challenging immersion into that mysterious world of youth-in-formation, a milieu that piques the curiosity of older generations beyond measure. *If* opens the doors to this private domain, explaining or intimating at will, with seeming indiscretion, the limitless angers, passions, and flights of imagination that youth encompasses.

(1) *College House. Return.* The script leads us at once into the school atmosphere of clamor. The students moving luggage or trunks along corridors and the shouts of disdainful upper-classmen recreate an uproar of first encounters for the spectator, through the eyes of a new boy, Jute (Sean Bury). Anderson beautifully delineates the interplay of charade and reality as we swiftly visualize the boys' cool acceptance of traditional routine and their humorous tolerance of Jute's anxiety to do everything correctly. It is this lofty fortitude, preached by the Old Guard ("a discipline not only to help others but to help yourselves") which so perfectly camouflages the boys' diffidence, their emotional vulnerability. On the walls of the study hall, or "sweat room" hang huge posters of Guevara or Sitting Bull, and when the film's major character, Mick Travers (Malcolm McDowell) first appears, a scarf around his face, a black hat adding mystery to his flamboyance, one is totally convinced that his nonconformist appearance will further inculcate moods of revolution. The scarf hides Mick's mustache (grown during the vacation period); when he first removes the scarf, a trembling of strings emphasizes his pride in his achievement and the wondrous effect it has upon those who see it. The mustache is shaved-off to a ringing of school bells, a death knell to a period of his freedom and individuality.

Such stylistic devices as changing from color imagery to sepia when we are among the teachers or headmasters (a new teacher's top-floor room could not be bleaker), adds to our

sense of two worlds coexisting in the name of education. British gentility in the midst of restless, guileful lads is hilariously spoofed in the school nurse's (Mona Washbourne) medical inspection, examining the boys' genitalia with a flashlight, as if she were abstractedly exploring the merits of *amaryllis belladonna*. The successive vignettes are carefully arranged remembrances of things past and still-present: the obdurate ignorance among educators who cannot see the symbolic warning of an American Negro rioter's bloodied figure held fast in a distorted photograph on a student's wall, or hear, in the talk among students in the afterdark of lights-out, a calmly-spoken, "Paradise is for the sex-obsessed."

(2) *College. Once Again Assembled.* (3) *Term Time.* (4) *Ritual and Romance.* The idea that young boys are capable of setting up their own moral code when left to themselves has always been one of the sublimated horrors of educators, and both the director and scriptwriter David Sherwin have chosen subtle means by which they disclose, in the atmosphere of this particular school, the demonic innocence that embraces violence as a form of diversion. While Jute struggles to learn the slangue of the school, we are treated to a deliciously satirical sequence in which a gloriously disheveled, cynical history master (Graham Crowden) gives a lecture, and during the full-throated singing of "Stand Up! Stand Up!" in chapel (this hymn is also the title of one of Anderson's most famous pleas for cinema commitment to modern problems), we are shown the confessions of a boy who tells the chaplain of his "dirty thoughts," only to receive a consoling hand atop the head and the phrase "Fight the good fight". Aside from Anderson's tongue-in-cheek approach to such moments, it is clear that the Kipling implications of the title (and the connotations of that famous poem) are the standards by which ironies within the film are strengthened. The jocular, unconcerned headmaster bumbles along with patchy intellectual name-dropping (he manages to place Buxtehude in the wrong century), remaining unaware of students like Mick, who prefers the provocative absorptions

of primitive rhythms in the "Sanctus" from the African *Missa Luba*.

Mick and his loyal room-mates, Johnny (David Wood) and Wallace (Richard Warwick) are *contemporary* people. The latter two are not consciously rebellious against the world, but extremely *aware* of it in the school's tradition-bound, musty labyrinth of demoralizing routine. In a sequence reminiscent of Schlöndorff's *Young Torless*, Wallace sits on a toilet, calmly strumming a guitar, while two stalls away, a group of younger students seize a classmate (Brian Pettifer), and hang him upside down in a toilet bowl, just for fun. When Wallace hears the choking boy, and rescues him, the boy's only statement is "Excuse me, sir. You're standing on my clothes." No explanations are given; the hierarchy of stronger vs. weaker is accepted without question. Long before the advent of sequences involving physical discipline (we *know* that Mick's attitudes will not remain unnoticed; the suspense is with us from the moment he appears behind the scarf), Anderson has defined the meting-out and acceptance of violence within the moral codes of the boys themselves. The dicta of Kipling's poem would demand the *endurance* of physical humiliation, and in the public (*private* in the American sense) school system of England, this unusual Victorian paradox of behavior (bolstered by memorizations of Kipling's disciple Henley), creates the most exemplary amalgams of heroes, cowards, and mixtures of each ever to be assembled along the march toward manhood.

Within the hierarchical society of the public school, it is to be expected that the boys' emotions will be stimulated to some extent, and the understated manifestations of homosexuality are presented on a double level. On one hand, the archly supercilious attitude of the young prefects toward the school's Ganymede, a boy named Phillips (Rupert Webster) is shown to be a matter of playful flirtatiousness, hiding physical desire and insecure egotism. Phillips is aware of the implications behind the veiled questions and epigrams thrown in his direction, but, imperturbably silent, performs his duties as a "scum"—serving tea or helping them with their

morning toilette. Faced with the tension of these inexpressible longings, the prefects seeth with hostility. Within seconds, they will exercise their prerogative to whip a boy or subject him to standing under cold showers: behind the repressions lie sensual despair and wellsprings of savagery. It is this demoralization of masculine love that is obliquely criticized in the film. The senior prefect, Rowntree (Robert Swann) is half-crazed by his conflicting emotions toward students like Phillips (whom he admires for his beauty) and Mick (whom he hates for his independence). With the former, the student is like an *objet d'art* to be appreciated and "traded" to another prefect, the cruelly introverted Denson (Hugh Thomas).

In contrast to the love-hate relationship between prefect and student, there is the profound *Blutbruderschaft* of Mick, Johnny, and Wallace—a comradeship that represents friendly, sincere loyalties at their most Kiplingesque. In addition, there is the idealized love between Phillips and Wallace which is delicately introduced in an exquisite, wordless interlude where the younger boy watches Wallace proudly exhibit his gymnastic grace in some horizontal-bar exercises. The purity of this friendship, moving from attraction, to communication (Wallace protects Phillips from the ubiquitous Denson) to intimacy (they are seen sleeping together), is indicative of the uncomplicated attachments in adolescence that transcend the distortions of established morals. The relationship is treated with respect and a rueful sense of its ephemerality.

Anderson's abrupt shift into fantasy in *If* is at its most exceptional in a sequence describing the escape of Mick and Johnny into the neighboring city (Cheltenham). They sneak away from a football match, cavort along the streets, and blatantly steal a motorcycle from a showroom. Their wild ride into the countryside, past those bright green fields and docile landscapes of Gloucestershire, has a sense of exhilaration, a swirling freedom that one never quite experienced in such films as Benedek's *The Wild One* or, more recently, the cinematic careenings of the angels-on-wheels genre. In a roadside café,

Mick and Johnny confront a beautiful, dark-haired waitress, her tresses à la Veronica Lake. This confrontation is sparked by meaningful looks, and the girl assumes the presence of a challenging demi-goddess, a provocative, sensual creature from a world beyond the masturbatory confines of the school dormitory. Mick confidently kisses the girl and receives a slap in the face, yet this is merely the acknowledgment of her pleasure. Mick plays the jukebox and the *Missa Luba* is heard: the music immediately transforms the realistic setting into the realm of Pinter—all further action is a stark charade of undefined, adolescent passion, enacted with unrestrained animality. The girl approaches Mick and says, "I like tigers," and he sniffs and growls at her. Soon, the two of them hiss, scratch, and pull at one another until they are embroiled in a wild, nude convolution of primitive union—a compelling day-nightmare of cinema-of-the-absurd, when adventure becomes myth and the culmination of an experience is the surreal spectacle of the girl (quite nameless) riding on the motorcycle with Mick and Johnny on a clear, free journey to Wherever. The effect of this sequence is so magnificent, this leap from realism to epic camera-metaphor (the work of Ondricek is splendid throughout the film) that one is hard put to rummage through memories for comparisons. It is very exciting, indeed, because it bursts through the confines of the early atmosphere of the school, evoking a wonder about humanity and youth that places the Cheltenham episode in the center of *If* like a glittering treasure: it is one of those dazzling moments that will be admired for decades to come.

(5) *Discipline*. (6) *Resistance*. It was the experience of this writer, during a sojourn in England, to listen to a young Oxonian relate that one of his old Housemasters would constantly quote "He that hateth reproof shall die," whenever protest against caning was heard. In Lindsay Anderson's *If*, there is a particularly brutal caning sequence in which Rowntree flogs Mick, Johnny, and Wallace for "setting a bad example." The whipping of Mick is the longest and most savage, and American audiences will be appalled, not only by the spectacle of such

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disciplinary action, but by Mick's reaction. With tears in his eyes, he shakes the prefect's hand, saying, "Thank you, Rowntree," and walks out of the gymnasium. The statement, like "God Bless Captain Vere!" is a blood-curdling affirmation of unjustifiable defeat, but one must keep in mind the point of view expressed in Kipling's poem. Mick is already much more of a man than Rowntree and his acceptance of the beating gives him an ominous, heroic stature. If criticisms are indirectly leveled against the system earlier in the film, it is in this section of the narrative that Anderson launches his major attack on the existing situation regarding discipline in public schools. One feels that it is a controversy that is still unresolved, because the prefectorial system varies in different schools regarding the use of the whip. However, the prefects in *If* are decidedly villains, whose motives for punishment are moralistic and retributive. Although Rowntree and Denson are a far cry from the likes of Squeers or M'Choakumchild, they embody the flaws of their more intelligent modern counterparts, in public schools where housemasters depend upon the prefects, who really control the power. Besides, the sixties have brought a generation of rebels, strong personalities who are irked by even the most moderate restraints. Just as, in Kipling's day, there was no room on Parnassus for the androgyne, so is there no quarter for Kipling in Pepperland. For instance, the privilege of simply normally going into the town is one of the most dramatic events in *If*, so that the discipline sequence has tragic implications beyond the film itself.

(7) *Forth To War*. (8) *Crusaders*. A staged war maneuver, in uniforms and packs, with marches and fake explosions, (they are part of the school's curriculum—a sort of ROTC drill) is used as an episode of farce and mockery. Young Jute looks upward quizzically when he hears "Jesus Christ is our Commanding Officer!" and Denson snarls, "We will *attack* and *destroy* that tree!" Anderson manages to bring enormous mirth into these episodes, and while the boys are absent, he shows Mrs. Kemp, the housemaster's wife (Mary McLeod), strolling nude through the dormitory like a bemused, pre-



The schoolboy crusaders: David Wood, Richard Warwick, and Malcolm McDowell in If . . .

Raphaelite castoff. Her introversions have been treated humorously throughout the film, but in this brief instance, her character becomes larger-than-life, an ironic symbol of melancholy repression. While the maneuvers are reduced to a shambles by Mick and his room-mates, there are again, two abrupt visual shifts to fantasy that are disconcertingly vague: the headmaster opens a drawer and therein lies the chaplain who has been "frightened to death" (we have not been led to expect such whimsey from either character during the film) by the real bullets that Mick had been firing at everyone. Then, later, when the trio of rebels came across a cache of ammunition and a cupboard filled with bottled forms of animal life, including a human foetus, the girl from the café suddenly appears, takes the jar from their hands and quietly places it back upon the shelves. Having already been exposed to the omniscient foetus as possibly becoming mankind's highest form of life (2001: *A Space Odyssey*), one is inclined to be a bit querulous about the awesome implications of this brief moment in *If*. It is just as well that this confrontation with a bottled life, symbolically locked-away in the recesses of a school storage bin, be taken at face value—a visual summation of the Establishment's attitude toward youth, of new ideas, unfulfilled and lost. A stunning moment, nevertheless.

When Mick and all those whose sensibilities have been thwarted finally turn against the

school, it is during a ritualistic charter-day ceremony. An old general gives a speech about tradition (while a wonderful lady in red sits in a crouchlike position of approval, holding a bunch of yellow flowers), as the hall gradually goes up in smoke. Anderson's final fantasy sequences of anarchy ultimately become ferocious warnings quite pertinent for the real world. In a way, *If* bolsters the Godardian conclusions in *Weekend*, viewed with compassion from the towers of academe. Although the spectator sympathizes throughout the film with Mick, the man, he may be horrified by his understanding and acceptance of Mick, the monster, leveling a machine gun upon his teachers below. On the old school grounds everywhere, the guerrillas are among us, Lindsay Anderson is himself again, and all's right with the film world—for a time.

—ALBERT JOHNSON

HELL IN THE PACIFIC

Director: John Boorman. Producer: Reuben Bercovitch. Screenplay: Alexander Jacobs, Eric Bercovici. Photography: Conrad Hall. Music: Lalo Schiffrin. Cinerama.

Shot by shot John Boorman's new film *Hell in the Pacific* must be the most thoughtfully, beautifully composed American movie since Boorman's own *Point Blank*. There can no longer be any question that his control of the medium is extraordinary. And yet the film is unsatisfying; the technical brilliance of *Hell in the Pacific* cannot entirely compensate for some crucial dramatic failures. Even more obviously than *Point Blank*, this film adds up to considerably less than the sum of its impressive parts.

But at least it is not what we expect of a desert island story. An American and Japanese soldier (Lee Marvin and Toshiro Mifune) find themselves marooned on the same Pacific island during World War II. Suspicion, fear, hatred eventually give way to a measure of understanding when they build a raft together and sail to another island, where reminders of the war estrange them once again. The script by Alexander Jacobs and Eric Bercovici—which Boorman follows roughly but compresses—was

remarkable for its care in detailing all of the stages in the painfully gradual evolution of the relationship. The script had a concentrated, steady momentum that has been lost in the film. Everything has been speeded up, the transitions have been blurred or simply obliterated, and the film comes at us in pieces, almost like a series of blackout sketches, still intriguing and unorthodox, but without a cumulative power.

Both script and film put a great deal of emphasis on the first stages of the relationship, basically a relationship of torturer to victim, with the roles constantly shifting back and forth, until they become almost indistinguishable. In their first actual face-to-face confrontation, murder is on their minds; in brief fantasy sequences we see each man's vision of his brutal murder by the other. But their hostility soon begins to change tone slightly; as the torments they devise for each other become more subtle and more complicated, we can see that they are growing to *need* each other to keep themselves alive. At one point Mifune has the opportunity to kill Marvin, but he demurs, and makes Marvin his slave instead. The film's most striking variation on the Robinson Crusoe story is its study of the psychology of persecution. The hostility of Marvin and Mifune is the archetypal hostility of two strangers, but it is still a desperate mutation of human intimacy, and it enables them to survive; the most profound sadism, in other words, includes a feeling of mutual dependency that, twisted slightly, may slip into friendship and affection. *Hell in the Pacific* probes the convolutions and ambiguities of hatred with startling rawness and imagination. This is not to say that the film is realistic. In fact, to accept it at all, it has to be understood as a metaphoric study of prejudice and aggression, and the impossibility of tolerance. But Boorman does not quite establish that he is focussing on a *symbolic* encounter, and so we are bothered by questions of plausibility—for instance, how did both men happen to get to the same island?—which should have been irrelevant. The film's opening should have been much stranger, much less literal. We have to